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ABSTRACT

Well-planned, cooperative efforts to develop positive attitudes can generate improved school climate and improved student performance, as illustrated by the experience of the Duval County (Florida) Public Schools. The district's marketing efforts focus on progress reporting and performance recognition both internally and externally. Among the elements of the program have been the establishment of high standards and competency testing for promotion and graduation, the elimination of social promotion, the initiation of academic competition and academic coaches, the provision of support to potential National Merit Scholars, and the generation of high parent involvement. The improvement in students' academic achievement as measured by standardized and national tests has been dramatic. The effort depends on teachers' abilities to motivate students, and this ability hinges in part on student attitudes. These attitudes are in turn affected by teacher attitudes. The Duval County program selects specific areas for improvement each year, and seeks national recognition for those contributing to its success. (PGD)

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ESSENCE OF EXCELLENCE

Improving School Climate

by

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Throughout the country, as the national spotlight has focused increasingly on the quality of education, the search for academic excellence has generated a new excitement and optimism. Shifting from the gloom and foreboding that followed the barrage of negative commentaries such as the infamous "Nation at Risk" report, this nation has now turned its attention toward finding and implementing the "essence of excellence."

Jacksonville, Florida, home of the nation's 17th largest school district, is proud to be among many that have identified and employed that essence which, captured in one word, is ATTITUDE. Unquestionably, it is the attitudes -- of students, teachers, parents, administrators, school boards, and communities --that truly make the difference. Our ability to turn on the switch that triggers a positive attitude, which also translates as "motivation," is the key to improving school climate and generating the educational excellence that has become a national priority of the highest order.

The dramatic success experienced in less than a decade by the Duval County Public Schools -- formerly considered an educational disaster and recognized across the country today for outstanding academic performance -- demonstrates how well-planned, cooperative efforts to develop positive attitudes can generate improved school climate and improve student performance.

Through "PR" in the form of Progress Reporting leading to Performance Recognition, internal and external marketing efforts have generated both pride and enthusiasm throughout the school district and the community, ensuring that districtwide instructional programs not only succeed, but also endure and grow in effectiveness.

Setting high standards, eliminating social promotion, establishing competency testing for promotion and graduation, initiating academic competition and academic coaches, working with potential National Merit Scholars, generating unprecedented parental involvement, have all been designed and implemented with Progress Reporting and Performance Recognition built in. Success in developing positive attitudes has ensured and augmented success in increasing educational excellence. The results speak for themselves. The school district that was 56th out of 67 on the State Student Assessment Test when it was initiated in 1977 has moved to first in both math and communications among Florida's major districts, with black student performance on the math portion of that test increasing by 295 percent.

Student scores on nationally standardized tests have increased throughout the district for the past six years, stand today above the national average at virtually every grade and subject, and have led to such significant results as a 73 percent increase in the number of National Merit Scholarship Semifinalists in the last two years.

Ninety percent of the public's attitude toward schools is determined by school employees. The attitude of school employees is determined by how they feel about what they do and how well they do it. The combined attitude of community and employees is the largest single factor determining the attitude of students. Obviously, the combination of all three not only affects, but virtually determines the school climate.

Teaching doesn't take place until someone learns something. With the teacher as transmitter and the student as receiver, the key to unlocking the learning process is finding the "turn-on" switch of the student. Not only is that switch located in different places for different students, but frequently is also shielded by indifference or even a negative attitude. The teacher's ability to find and turn on the motivation switch depends primarily on the positive attitudes of both transmitter and receiver. To the extent that we can influence those attitudes, we can improve school climate and capture the "essence of excellence."

In the Duval County Public Schools, internal and external marketing efforts include selection of yearly themes identifying and focusing attention on specific areas for improvement, while at the same time building more positive attitudes throughout the school district and the community. Re-emphasizing the traditional values of courtesy, respect, and patriotism, for example, led to a positive resurgence of

pride and accomplishment with a yearlong series of planned activities and events under the theme "Courtesy Is Contagious." "Learn to Learn" emphasized development of programs to teach students study skills, while "It's Up to Me" and "Prepare for Success" spearheaded districtwide efforts to motivate each individual -- student, teacher, parent, community -- to set high goals, take advantage of every opportunity, and focus on what it takes to be successful.

Perhaps the most effective means of generating positive attitudes is for those individuals, schools, and the district to receive praise from prominent individuals and institutions outside the district or community. We expect teachers to praise students, principals to recognize good teachers, the school board or superintendent to compliment outstanding schools, and the community to respect and praise the achievements of the school system. How much greater is the impact when that praise comes from nationally recognized personalities such as the U.S. Secretary of Education, syndicated columnist James J. Kilpatrick, nationally known broadcast commentator Paul Harvey, television personality Phil Donahue, or from Time Magazine, The Christian Science Monitor, Newsweek, The Congressional Record, Education Week, Education Times, The Dallas Morning News, The Dallas Times-Herald, or CBS and NBC national news. The public schools

in Jacksonville, its students, and its teachers have responded to the glow of this praise with a renewed sense of purpose and a positive change in attitude that have continued the improvements which drew such prized recognition in the first place.

The answer to Paul Harvey's question "How in the world did they do it?" which he rhetorically asked on national radio and television, is ATTITUDE. The ability to generate success through well-planned and coordinated programs, and to market that success through Progress Reporting and Performance Recognition are the two ingredients in this formula for success.

In Jacksonville, Florida, the first ingredient in this formula has included a wide variety of special efforts to increase student achievement. Academic competition, starting as early as the sixth grade, builds excitement for learning through televised inter-scholastic matches that culminate each year in an Invitational Academic Tournament and National Academic Super Bowl. Special efforts to provide students with homework assistance involve a telephone homework hot-line, 50 geographically located school-based after-hours assistance centers, and a daily televised Learning Hour that features live, call-in help with homework. Academically talented students as early as the fifth grade are identified as potential National Merit Scholars and receive special individual guidance and support

that includes the incentive to qualify for the Superintendent's 100 Super Scholars Club. And Project BASE(Blacks for Academic Success in Education) identifies and assists minority students who show high academic potential, while a parallel research project involves a longitudinal study to determine the causes behind differing achievement levels of black students and white students.

These and other carefully designed programs have provided the opportunity to apply the second ingredient in the formula: Progress Reporting and Performance Recognition, which also takes place not by chance, but by design. That combination has produced a dramatic and positive change in attitude, which not surprisingly has paralleled the school district's improved school climate and rise to national prominence for academic excellence.